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FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0305
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000067

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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA; DRL/IRF MATES AND KELLY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/20/2016
TAGS: [VT](#) [KIRF](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#)
SUBJECT: VATICAN HARDENING LINE ON ISLAM

REF: A) VATICAN 32; B) VATICAN 53; C) VATICAN 43

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (C) Relations with Islam and the issue of reciprocity for worship have taken center stage recently at the Holy See. Pope Benedict took the initial step in this direction in February with strong comments when he welcomed Morocco's new ambassador. Since then successive Vatican officials have weighed in with comments urging greater clarity in relations with the Islamic world. Benedict's recent meeting with Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was a 30- minute discussion on religious freedom in Egypt, Iraq and Iran, as well as the future of inter-faith relations. No longer willing simply to turn the other cheek, the Vatican is demanding greater protection for Christians and greater freedom for religious expression. Influential Jesuit-run journal La Civiltà Cattolica dedicated a hard-hitting editorial to the issue of religious tolerance, describing the "fundamentalist orchestrated" and government-inspired violence surrounding the publication of satirical cartoons about Islam. Muslim diplomats here have emphasized that the Islamic world looks to the Holy See for leadership in dialogue efforts. While the Vatican's continued engagement on the issues is certain, a harder line is clearly emerging. End Summary.

Enough Turning the Other Cheek

12. (C) In recent years, the Holy See has generally been a voice of moderation in dealings with the Muslim world, but continuing terrorism and the recent cartoon violence have led Vatican officials to begin hardening their line. The Vatican has increasingly been calling for reciprocity on worship and religious freedom issues, making clear that dialogue and understanding cannot be a one-way street. Pope Benedict himself took an initial public step in this regard, calling for greater reciprocity in religious matters when receiving the Moroccan Ambassador for the first time (ref a). Speaking in the context of the violence against Christians and others in the wake of the cartoon controversy, the pope affirmed that peace could only be

assured through "respect for the religious convictions and practices of others, in a reciprocal way in all societies."
[Note: Ambassador Rooney's subsequent meeting with the Moroccan ambassador revealed that the Moroccan representative was receptive to Benedict's call, and hoped to intensify his government's interaction with the Holy See (ref b).]

13. (C) In recent months other Vatican officials, in what appears to be a coordinated strategy, have shared the Church's concern and their "personal" perspectives on relations with Islam and the issue of reciprocity with the Italian secular press. Holy See Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano told journalists that "if we tell our people they have no right to offend, we have to tell the others [Muslims] they have no right to destroy us." Bishop Rino Fisichella, Rector of the Holy See's Lateran University and one of the Vatican's top theological advisors, said the Vatican should speak out more on reciprocity and drop its "diplomatic silence." "We should put pressure on international organizations to make the societies and states in majority Muslim countries face up to their responsibilities," he said. Vatican FM Lajolo recently told journalists that the Church had to "always stress our demand for reciprocity in political contacts with authorities in Islamic countries and, even more, in cultural contacts". The frankest comment came from a senior official at the Holy See's equivalent of a supreme court, who said he had seen "enough of this turning the other cheek! It's our duty to protect ourselves." Only a wayward comment from frequently off-message Cardinal Renato Martino on allowing the teaching of Islam in Italian public schools sounded a different note from the emerging Vatican view, and he later clarified his comments.

Pope Raises Islam with Cardinals

14. (C) On the margins of the late March consistory bringing together the world's cardinals, Pope Benedict XVI held meetings to discuss several issues - among them, relations with Islam. Though the cardinals are observing secrecy regarding the

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specifics of the meetings, contacts tell us that the main message was a call for continued dialogue with moderate Muslims, coupled with a new message of accountability in Islam. Several cardinals reportedly took up the latter theme in earnest at the meeting. Washington's Cardinal Theodore McCarrick told the press that the pope was concerned most about fundamentalist Islam which was "a threat to every other faith." The pope took the opportunity the same weekend to call for greater religious freedom during his traditional Sunday Angelus prayer March 26.

Reciprocity also a Focus in Private

15. (C) The Holy See is also focusing on the issue of reciprocity in private diplomatic meetings and behind closed doors in the various Vatican dicasteries (departments). Moroccan Ambassador Achour told Ambassador Rooney that his initial Vatican meetings focused on these dynamics (ref b). Pope Benedict's March 13 meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was a tightly-packed 30-minute discussion of religious freedom in Egypt, Iraq and Iran, as well as the future of inter-faith relations worldwide.

16. (C) Several top Vatican officials have expressed to us privately even stronger opinions on the issue of reciprocity and on Islam in general. Post reported previously on a dinner the Ambassador hosted for the Archbishop Pietro Sambi, new nuncio to the U.S., attended by several prominent cardinals (ref a). The common opinion was that current approaches to Islam were not working; the Church needed to harden its line in recognition of the fact that dialogue with Islam was hampered by institutional and theological factors unlikely to change. Cardinal Francis Arinze, former Vatican lead on inter-religious dialogue, told

the Ambassador much the same recently in a private meeting. He added that Saudi Arabia's position that the whole country is basically a shrine is untenable. Even many Saudis agree, he continued, but cannot say anything about it.

¶17. (C) Another close contact in the Secretariat of State told us that there was more and more talk behind closed doors in the Vatican on reciprocity. The recent gifts of Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Alsaud to Georgetown and Harvard Universities to establish or expand academic opportunities relating to Islamic studies had created a buzz. "There's nothing wrong with the gifts, or studying Islam," our contact said, "but what about the freedom to learn about Christianity in Saudi Arabia?"

Vatican-Sponsored Journal Weighs In

¶18. (U) The most systematic exposition of the new Vatican thinking was found recently in the influential Jesuit magazine, La Civiltà Cattolica (Catholic Civilization), a mouthpiece for the Holy See's Secretariat of State. Civiltà accused some Islamic governments of "conniving" with fundamentalists to foment the violent reactions to the cartoons. While the magazine condemned the cartoons for their blasphemous depiction of Mohammed which outraged Muslims, it also criticized the violence against the West resulting from what was merely "a form of satire." Civiltà pointed out that European governments were making a concerted effort to integrate Muslims into their societies. Any problems associated with this process Civiltà attributed to the Muslim community itself, due to the lack of desire to integrate, or the difficulty of trying to dialogue with a community with no single identifiable leadership.

¶19. (U) Civiltà went on to call for reciprocity from governments in predominantly Muslim states for religious worship and freedoms. "Just as in the West Muslims are guaranteed complete freedom of conscience and religion, this also must be guaranteed - on the basis of reciprocity - to Christians living in countries with a Muslim majority." Civiltà called on European governments to push for these rights. Europe must show "greater firmness against any attack on these principles" - no matter who the victims are, Civiltà said.

Dips Take Notice of New Directions

¶10. (C) The Holy See's tightening of its Islam policy has caused ripples within the diplomatic community here. In discussing the pope's changes in his office for inter-religious dialogue (ref c and d) and the Holy See's new assertiveness on reciprocity, Muslim diplomats have mainly expressed the hope that the Vatican will remain active on inter-religious dialogue. Many have stressed to us that the Islamic world looks to the

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Holy See for leadership in these dialogue efforts - its continued efficacy and engagement is crucial. The general tone of the dialogue here is certainly more rigid than it has been in recent years. In one recent meeting Iraq's ambassador to the Holy See was animated as he told Ambassador Rooney that he saw the need for a much tougher line on Islam. With the caveat that he was expressing his personal views, he said that any dialogue with moderate Islam was going to be a problem for the West. "No real Muslim will accept Christians and Jews," he claimed, "how can there be any real dialogue or peaceful co-existence under those circumstances?"

Comment

¶11. (C) Movement on positions comes slowly at the Vatican - one reason that the recent flurry of harder-line comments on Islam is notable. Civiltà Cattolica is a convenient tool for

the Holy See to float these views without having to enter the morass of politics and media that a formal document would entail. The process whereby Civilta Cattolica copy is scrutinized by the Secretariat of State prior to publication also allows the Holy See to "insert" or strengthen certain policy messages; in fact, one contact in the Secretariat of State told us a recent article had come almost entirely from his notes.

¶12. (C) The worries of some Muslim diplomats and others notwithstanding, the Holy See's continued - and even heightened - engagement on these issues is certain. Only its approach is changing. As one example, the Secretariat of State (MFA) has quietly been convening a Vatican-wide working group on Islam that is attempting to coordinate various viewpoints and experiences in dealing with Islam. The group is working on recommendations and projects, including a Vatican gathering of papal nuncios from Muslim countries at which envoys could share experiences and discuss common challenges. In general, bringing personnel from various dicasteries together for a working group is rare for the territorial Vatican bureaucracy. The move is one example of how seriously leadership is taking the current state of relations with Islam.

ROONEY